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Special theme: the Millennium Development Goals and indigenous peoples: redefining the Goals

Ongoing priorities and themes

Information received from the United Nations system

United Nations Human Settlements Programme

Summary

The work of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) is guided by the Habitat Agenda and other international instruments and frameworks related to economic and social development and human rights. The main ongoing activities of UN-Habitat in the field of the rights and needs of indigenous peoples involve efforts to promote inclusiveness, social integration and the realization of housing rights in human settlements, e.g., activities related to the implementation of goal 7, target 11 of the Millennium Development Goals; the Global Campaign on Urban Governance; the Global Campaign for Secure Tenure; and the United Nations Housing Rights Programme.

In response to the outcome and requests of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at its previous sessions, particularly the recommendations contained in paragraphs 37 and 65 of its report on its fourth session, UN-Habitat has strengthened its focus on indigenous issues and the needs and rights of indigenous peoples. Efforts are under way to organize an expert group meeting as a follow-up to the research project on indigenous peoples' right to adequate housing, undertaken jointly with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

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The work of UN-Habitat on poverty alleviation and Millennium Development Goals, for example, has the potential to establish direct links with indigenous peoples' livelihoods. Its gender policy aims to address the Habitat Agenda commitment to gender equality by promoting women's equal rights and empowerment. Its activities in the field of disaster mitigation, post conflict and safety in human settlements is related to housing and living conditions of indigenous peoples in most cases. After the tsunami disaster in South-East Asia in 2004, UN-Habitat has taken part in the relief and reconstruction activities jointly with other United Nations agencies, particularly with the United Nations Development Programme.

UN-Habitat participated actively in the International Expert Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals, Indigenous Participation and Good Governance held in New York from 11 to 13 January 2006, and assisted deliberations to focus on the effects of urbanization and migration on the lives of indigenous peoples, and policies and actions needed to address potential and possible negative effects of these processes.

1. The present report is prepared in response to the recommendations contained in the report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on its fourth session, particularly those contained in paragraphs 37 and 65 addressed exclusively to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and in other paragraphs as relevant to the mandate and activities of the Organization.

2. Efforts are under way to organize an expert group meeting to review the status of the implementation process of indigenous peoples' housing rights globally, and to identify and document best practices as a follow-up to the findings and recommendations of the research project on the right of indigenous peoples to adequate housing, undertaken within the framework of the United Nations Housing Rights Programme, a joint initiative of UN-Habitat and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

3. Due to the current lack of funds, UN-Habitat has contacted a number of potential donor countries to explore whether the planned expert group meeting could be hosted by governmental and/or other authorities and organizations in their respective countries and whether financial support could be provided for the endeavour. When the present report was being prepared, no response had yet been received from the contacts. When the funding situation becomes clear and if adequate resources become available, the meeting is expected to be held in the third or fourth quarter of 2006.

4. The expert group meeting will address current situations where indigenous peoples are subject to discrimination and inequality in diverse aspects of housing, including laws and policies that have discriminatory effects, discriminatory allocation of resources for housing, including credit and loans, discriminatory practices of private landlords in the rental market (often preventing indigenous peoples from renting even the worst accommodation), and policies and practices in place to counter such discrimination and inequality.

5. Attention will also be paid to indigenous poverty, disadvantage and discrimination in the right to adequate housing, particularly in relation to the fact that the status of indigenous people is closely connected to dispossession from their lands. In many instances, land dispossession — whether a result of colonialization processes, changes to land tenure schemes or forced eviction for private development projects or the exploitation of natural resources — forces indigenous peoples to leave their lands, and thus all means to sustain themselves or gain a livelihood. As a result of loss of both livelihood and adequate housing, indigenous women and men are compelled to migrate to seek them elsewhere, often in cities and towns.

6. In addition to the above, issues of indigenous women specific to housing, whether in urban or rural areas, will be addressed. Poor and inadequate housing conditions, characterized by overcrowding, lack of privacy and absence or inadequacy of sanitation and basic services exacerbate women's vulnerability to domestic violence. Another phenomenon is the fact that indigenous women are unable to acquire housing independently from men. In some circumstances, society alienates women who live alone, whether they are divorcees, widows, single women or married women who are separated from their husbands. Additionally, customary law, traditions and culture often deprive women of the opportunity to own, acquire or inherit property.

7. Moreover, the expert group meeting will focus on forced evictions and migration to urban centres driven by employment prospects. In the cities, indigenous peoples' experience extreme poverty, rampant discrimination and a loss of spiritual, community and family ties, as well as indigenous culture and values. With the prohibitive costs of home ownership, their housing conditions are often very poor. Many, therefore, live in informal settlements and slums, while others are left homeless.

8. The expert group meeting will address the issue of poverty as a key aspect of improving the housing conditions of indigenous peoples. This is in keeping with the principle that the right to adequate housing is an integral part of the right to an adequate standard of living as articulated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Governments must create the circumstances for indigenous peoples to become economically self-reliant. They must also develop specific economic policies that stimulate employment opportunities in urban areas and development in rural areas, taking into account indigenous peoples' needs, rights and modes of production.

9. One focus of the expert group meeting will be participation in decision-making. It is a fact that indigenous women and men will continue to be marginalized if they are excluded from decision-making processes. Governments must ensure that indigenous peoples are included as equal partners in all decision-making processes, particularly in those issues of interest and importance to indigenous communities. With regard to housing, indigenous men and women must participate freely and equally in the development of any legislation, policies or programmes that could have an impact on their housing conditions. Indigenous men and women must also participate equally in discussions, negotiations and decisions regarding development projects that are to be implemented on their lands. The principle of free, prior and informed consent should be applied at all stages of the project cycle. The voices of indigenous peoples must be heard and their demands and grievances met when major decisions are taken regarding development priorities and the allocation of resources.

10. The expert group meeting will identify and further document successful programmes and projects, which are often those that have involved indigenous peoples in meaningful and diverse ways. Examples include initiatives in Canada, where social/public housing owned and operated by indigenous peoples and designed in a culturally sensitive manner has proved very popular with indigenous tenants; in Finland, where the Government implemented a loan and grant scheme for the Saami that enabled them to build their own houses on their own lands; and in Kenya, where Maasai women have been part of a project that allows them to use indigenous skills and materials to redesign existing housing so that it responds more to their needs.

11. UN-Habitat is addressing most of the issues raised in the fourth and previous sessions of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues within its general activities, which are aimed at improving living conditions of the poor, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including indigenous peoples. In that framework, the work of UN-Habitat on security of tenure provides scope for a strategic partnership with indigenous peoples in addressing the complex nature of land issues. All indigenous peoples retain a strong sense of their own culture, the most salient feature of which is a special relationship to land. The work of UN-Habitat on poverty alleviation and

Millennium Development Goals has the potential to establish direct links with indigenous peoples' livelihoods. It seeks to promote the participation of civil society (including non-governmental organizations) in human settlement development and related decision-making processes. The issue is also relevant to the needs and concerns of indigenous peoples. Despite the fact that urban settlements hold great potential as engines of economic and social development, they can at the same time generate and intensify social exclusion, denying the benefits of urban life to the poor, to women, youth and other marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples.

12. The gender policy of UN-Habitat aims to address the Habitat Agenda commitment to gender equality through the objectives of promoting women's equal rights and women's empowerment internationally in the area of human settlement development, supporting Governments, non-governmental organizations and other partners in capacity-building and development in order to mainstream gender equality in human settlement development, and mainstreaming a gender perspective throughout UN-Habitat activities. While working towards those objectives, UN-Habitat focuses on the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged women groups, including indigenous women. The main method of outreach for the empowerment of women in human settlements is through the global women's networks that form part of the Huairou Commission. The gender task force, an internal body in UN-Habitat, aims to mainstream gender in all aspects of the work of the Programme.

13. UN-Habitat activities in areas of disaster mitigation, post-conflict and safety are related to the housing and living conditions of indigenous peoples in most cases. After the tsunami disaster in South East Asia in 2004, for example, UN-Habitat took part in the relief and reconstruction activities jointly with other United Nations agencies, particularly with the United Nations Development Programme. In the Aceh region in Indonesia, the efforts focused on land issues and were undertaken in three directions: (a) relocation of entire settlements where destruction was significant; (b) readjustment in existing settlements where destruction was partial; and (c) settlement upgrading where in situ improvement was feasible. Given the importance of land issues, the activities are directly affecting the lives of many indigenous peoples.

14. The participatory mapping and community action plan process of UN-Habitat enables community members to take an active role in re-establishing formal occupancy rights throughout areas affected by the tsunami. The mapping of plot ownership in new or rehabilitated villages will become the basis for the registration and provision of land certificates by the national land agency in Aceh. Some 5,000 families are currently directly assisted in Aceh by UN-Habitat.

15. The involvement of UN-Habitat in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and particularly goal 7, targets 10 and 11, is relevant to the issues, needs and rights of indigenous peoples.

16. As elaborated in section A, global research on the housing conditions of indigenous peoples in both urban and rural areas — and including the status of the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing as enshrined in international instruments — reveals that indigenous peoples live in worse conditions than the rest of the population in most countries. Furthermore, research highlights the vulnerability of indigenous groups, which are often affected by displacement, the insecurity of tenure over their traditional homelands and the culturally inappropriate

housing alternatives offered by authorities. Goal 7, target 11, which envisages the achievement of a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020, is relevant to the status and needs of indigenous peoples in both urban and rural areas, and is also clearly addressed in the Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda. Similarly, target 10, which aims at the halving of the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water, is directly relevant to the mandate and the diverse activities of UN-Habitat.

17. UN-Habitat supports the recommendations made by the Inter-Agency Support Group on Indigenous Issues and the outcome of discussions held on the topic during the fourth session of the Forum. UN-Habitat furthermore believes that the above-mentioned targets should be given special attention, with clear quantification, so that more effective commitments can be made at the regional and national levels and related actions can be initiated.

18. UN-Habitat participated in the International Expert Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals, Indigenous Participation and Good Governance, held in New York from 11 to 13 January 2006. It discussed the principles of good urban governance as defined by the Global Campaign on Urban Governance, one of its main initiatives. It also highlighted, inter alia, the important changes taking place in the lives of indigenous peoples in most parts of the world as a result of urbanization and migration processes. UN-Habitat recommended that the capacities of indigenous peoples and their organizations be strengthened so that their participation and effectiveness in urban governance could be facilitated. The representatives at the Meeting agreed upon the importance of the highlighted issues and proposed recommendations to be reflected in the outcome of its deliberations.

19. Major upcoming events for UN-Habitat relevant to indigenous issues include the third session of the World Urban Forum, to be held in Vancouver, Canada, from 19 to 23 June 2006, and the twenty-first session of the Governing Council of UN-Habitat, to be held in Nairobi, from 16 to 20 April 2007.